

Towards a Critical Decolonial Turn/Theory: Beyond the Binary of the West Versus Africa

Africa Spectrum

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Abstract

As writing on decolonisation in African Studies has surged, efforts to avoid the concept becoming a mere metaphor, bandwagon, ideological trope, or mantra have grown, with scholars emphasising decolonial theory's ongoing relevance to the emancipation of formerly colonised Africans. This essay argues that to achieve its emancipatory goals, decolonial theory and intended praxes must re-centre the everyday realities of African societies. Recentring Africans is needed to move beyond Global North versus Africa as the ontological site for decolonisation. Recentring African societies has important epistemological and methodological implications for recentring African agency to make the decolonial project less reactionary and more proactive. I propose "post-independence" as an approach to decolonisation that offers descriptive and prescriptive means to locate the (im)material responsibilities of Africans in recentring their history. Post-independence allows a reimagining of how to undo the effects of colonialism by presenting colonialism as an episodic moment in Africa's long history.

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Keywords

African agency, African studies, critical decoloniality, Decolonisation, post-independence

Introduction

There is a flourishing discussion of decolonisation/decoloniality underway in African Studies.¹ This surge in scholarship stems from a concern that decolonisation is becoming a “metaphor” (Tuck and Yang, 2012), “catch-all idea/trope” (Táíwò, 2019), “bandwagon” (Moosavi, 2020) or “mantra” (Chan, 2023) that overlooks the quotidian realities of Africans. Scholars associated with this apprehensive view make at least two consequential claims. First, decolonisation (also decoloniality) does not provide sufficient tools to evaluate the realities of ex-colonised peoples in Africa, six decades or more since independence (e.g. Eze, 2015; Matolino, 2020). Second, decolonisation, as an epistemic and/or political project, lacks conceptual and practical precision rendering it more ideological than practical (e.g. Chan, 2023; Clapham, 2020; Táíwò, 2019; Olúfẹ̀mi, 2022). As Matolino (2020: 226) argues, current decolonisation studies fail to grasp what is at stake in Africa:

Thinking of decolonisation as a primary factor of our station necessarily involves abdicating other responsibilities we might have towards our situation. Such responsibilities might include thinking about pressing questions of the day that are not of a colonial nature ... If we were to ask how we could change ordinary lives for the better, anyone who would suggest decoloniality as a starting point will realize that she will never go far from that starting point.

In response to such critiques, protagonists of decolonisation theory have underlined its epistemic and political importance for African peoples in the twenty-first century. According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2023a: 1), “resurgent and insurgent decolonisation struggles of the twenty-first century ... [exist because of] the planetary cognitive empire that continues to reproduce intellectual imperialism, sustain coloniality of knowledge, shape African intellectual consciousness, and nourish the Africanist enterprise.” He contends that the decolonisation struggle is “no longer a state-driven and regulated project linked to elite politics of seeking to capture state power” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2023a: viii). Instead, the decolonisation process resides with “political society confronting the failures of the nation-states” in Africa (Mignolo, 2023: n.p; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2023a).

For Mignolo (2023), “the explosive preponderance of the words ‘decoloniality/decolonisation’ in the recent past” represents more than scholars jumping on a bandwagon or engaging in metaphor. Rather the concept’s spread heralds a “change of era,” distinct from the previous “era of changes.” Mignolo (2023: n.p.) argues that this change represents “not ‘transition’ but ‘explosions’ in all corners of the planet where modernity/coloniality [generates] turbulences, dissatisfactions, and conflicts.” Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2023a: vii) further notes the “effort[s], sacrifices and struggles to push decolonisation into its present status of planetary consciousness” (also Mitova, 2023). The concept of

decoloniality/decolonisation “pieces together the planetary grammar of civil and epistemic disobediences and rebellions that connect peoples and their struggles worldwide [and] is directed to grasp modernity’s darker side and to illuminate the underlying logic that explains conjunctural events” (Mignolo, 2023: n.p.).

For decolonial proponents, these events are a consequence of the liberal international order’s failure to address multiple “*claims of justice*” due to its normative and epistemic biases (Reus-Smit and Zarakol, 2023: 1, emphasis in original; Lu, 2023). The ideas and institutions that emerged after World War II failed to foresee and respond to multiple crises, and they are unable or unwilling to adapt to change.

Behind the theory of decoloniality is the idea that formal decolonisation did not completely emancipate the majority of Africans. How then can we make the decolonial project accomplish the unfinished emancipatory task started by earlier anti-colonial struggles? I contend that, counter to most existing decolonial theory, we must take political independence as a critical starting point for theorising the lives of post-independence Africans in Africa. Colonialism – the political and economic control of Africa by European powers – began and ended, therefore, any manifestations of (epistemic) coloniality – read as structures of domination – in post-independence Africa warrant a careful analysis to understand why they remain unmitigated (Táíwò, 2019). In this analysis, “post-independence” African agency matters. First, I argue that, agency for the decolonial project lies with African leaders. Second, the decolonial project must focus on people’s lives. Third, the location or geopolitical focus of decolonisation should not be on Europe/Global North–Africa interactions but on life in Africa itself. In short, the decolonial project must be located in Africa, first.

When colonialism ended, political, and economic control passed to Africans. While an obvious point, it is a significant one: ex-colonised people of Africa had, and continue to have, the freedom/opportunity to determine how to organise their politics and socio-economics affairs. Independence offered the opportunity and obligation to undo the effects of colonisation. Henceforth, political and economic development of Africa became an endogenous affair, albeit not unencumbered by the vestiges of colonialism and the international system writ large. The obligation and goal of African (elite) control of politics and economics in the post-independence era is to make freedom matter in ways that are different from life under colonial rule. This constitutes the task of African agency: undoing the effects of colonialism. By elite, I mean more than elected officials. I include leaders at all levels of society.

This essay aims to propose ontological, epistemological, and methodological pathways for the decolonial project. I argue for an empirically based theory of decolonisation informed by the day-to-day realities of African societies. Decolonial thought and praxes are primarily about people’s lives. Gerring (2011) proposes two approaches to social science theorising that concerns people’s lives. The first approach is to search for appropriate semantics to represent a particular phenomenon one seeks to write about. The second approach is to focus on the phenomenon itself rather than the labels and definitions we give it. Gerring’s second criterion should guide us in writing about the African condition. If we are guided in this direction, we are soon confronted with the

grim reality that more than sixty years after independence most Africans are still in the misery corner of the world. To improve the realities of Africans, I propose that political independence must constitute a critical starting point in writing about the lives of ex-colonised Africans.

The current location of the decolonial project between Africa and the Global North, rather than a project primarily focused on and in Africa, yields problematic research designs and outcomes. First, it has so far made the decolonial project reactionary. The framing of the decolonial project primarily as a quest for epistemic justice/freedom (e.g. see Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018a,b, 2023a) bounds African agency to, and circumscribes it by, the agency of Western/Northern epistemic agents. For example, claims that Western metrics and indices of knowledge are not suitable to account for African indigenous knowledge systems (AIKS) and African knowledge readiness can be reactionary if the claim ends there. We need to go further, fashioning research projects aimed at creating knowledge-ready economies to materialise African solutions for African problems. Furthermore, the location of decoloniality between Africa and the Global North has unwittingly contributed to and/or sustained one of the problems decolonisation seeks to address – epistemicide. Focusing on proving epistemicide sways intellectual efforts away from identifying and magnifying rich, extant African contributions to knowledges (Kumalo, 2020). As a corollary, African societies that constitute the object and subject of decolonialisation may receive less attention in the decolonial discourse than societies of the Global North accused of committing epistemicide.

In what follows, I examine the construction and location of African agency in recent decolonial scholarship. Both protagonists and critics of decolonisation promote an agency-based approach to the decolonial discourse in African Studies, but they differ in where they locate agency. I contend that both protagonists and proponents of decolonisation should be concerned with the daily lives of ordinary Africans whose struggles inform the decolonisation discourse and intended praxes. Post-independence offers an approach to re-centre African societies/lives as an imperative in shifting the ontological site of decolonial theory to enable research and political projects to accurately conceptualise what some have described as Africa's second independence struggle.

African Agency and its Location in the Decolonisation Project

Both protagonists and critics of decolonisation are concerned with African agency. However, they differ in where African agency should be located and what African agents should prioritise (see next section). Proponents of decolonial theory generally frame decolonisation as an epistemic project, arguing that African epistemic agents must produce “authentic postcolonial African scholarship” that is “consciousness transforming and emancipatory to encapsulate the dynamic, ingenious ways in which African intellectuals on the continent and in the diaspora animate agency while navigating hostile and/or toxic neo-colonial academic spaces” (Andrews and Khalema, 2023: 216). The epistemic project underscores “the importance of context and voice as a prerequisite to an emancipatory discourse connected to the lived experiences of African peoples”

(Andrews and Khalema, 2023: 219). I do not disagree with this position. However, I would add that the essence of the lived experiences of African peoples makes decolonisation a liberatory/emancipatory project. It requires a proactive engagement with the methodological implications of this liberatory/emancipatory ethics (see next section, also Mama, 2007).

Nevertheless, with few exceptions and because of the definition of the decolonial project as epistemic disobedience against the tyranny of Eurocentrism, it has been “reactionary rather than pragmatic” (Olaitan and Oloruntoba, 2023: 32). The point is not that Africa lacks epistemes, knowledges, or modes of articulating the world. The point is that African epistemologies are made relevant only in response to Eurocentrism rather than as knowledge in situ. Yet, an emancipatory decolonial project must demonstrate African methodological agency to create knowledge. As Olaitan and Oloruntoba (2023: 49) argue, “reacting or rejecting western ways of knowing is not the same thing as producing knowledge, as the former still perpetuates the universality of Eurocentric ways of knowing.”

When African knowledges are framed as an alternative to Western epistemes, this comparison (unwittingly) reifies their *otherness*. This comparative framing reduces African knowledges to undoing the effects of colonialism. As a result, it inadvertently contributes to the marginalisation of African epistemes as a focus on Eurocentrism sways attention away from the endogenous development of methodologies and epistemological projects to understand extant African knowledges independent of Western epistemes. The call for endogenous development does not imply methodological nationalism or a quest for knowledge purity but critical, creative, and subversive engagement with multiple knowledges towards “epistemic restitution” (Kumalo, 2020: 21). This epistemic restitution should not be understood only in the negative as freedom from a “cognitive empire” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021) but rather in the positive as first and foremost an effort to understand and expand African societies’ capacities to resolve their internal problems first. The positive agenda calls for basing the associated epistemological project in Africa rather than embracing the reactionary and erroneous proposition that domination and injustice (only) exist between Africa and the West.

Cawood and Amiradakis (2023) have proposed critical decolonial theory (CDT) as a methodological paradigm to accomplish proactive decolonisation. The CDT approach underscores the need to “engage in immanent critique of the decolonisation project itself” (Cawood and Amiradakis, 2023: 1). Without critical reflexive decoloniality, the decolonial project can lead to what they describe as a “reactive internalisation of essentialism when it comes to the self-definition of Africans” (Cawood and Amiradakis, 2023: 2). For example, reactive internalisation of Africans as collectively oppressed by the Global North risks ignoring local sources of oppression because of the tendency to treat local oppression as insignificant compared to external oppression and marginalisation. Thus, CDT helps to unravel the connections between colonial exploitation and its continuation in post-independence Africa, including the continuous exploitation and neglect of ordinary Africans by African political elites, which often gets lost in the ‘Africa versus the West’ framing of decoloniality.

Take, for instance, the exclusion/underrepresentation of African/s scholarship in African studies in the Global North. Decolonial scholars explain this exclusion as a

manifestation of the unmitigated effects of colonialism and colonality of knowledge. Andrews and Patrick (2023: 92) contend that the predominance of white faculty and white scholarship on the syllabi in the African Studies Centres in the Global North can lead to “writing *about* Africa and not *for* Africa.” Because pedagogical choices are not incidental but reflect worldviews, the predominance of white faculty in African Studies in the Global North leads to the selection, promotion, and teaching materials that perpetuate Africa as an object of study rather than as a place of knowledge (Sondarjee, 2023). This “active” marginalisation of “African events, epistemologies, and epistemic agents” (Sondarjee, 2023: 168) creates worldviews and indices of knowledge that are unequal and undercut efforts to democratise knowledge (Zavale, 2023).

I do not disagree that knowledge inequalities exist between Africa and the West – the supporting evidence on knowledge inequalities is well established in the extant scholarship. Neither do I disagree with the corollary argument for de-constitution of dominant epistemes (read as Eurocentric knowledges) and the re-constitution of African knowledges. What I disagree with is the framing of the associated epistemic political project as intractably ensnared by a cognitive empire. We trace one of the problems of Eurocentrism in African Studies to how it is taught in the West. Yet, most African universities are controlled by Africans, we academics have the option to decide how we design courses and teach them in African universities. Epistemic re-constitution has a pedagogical dimension that allows for African agency.

Thus, the pedagogical dimension of Eurocentrism in African Studies should not only be read as how African studies is taught in the West, it should also raise questions about how African studies and other similar disciplines, including international studies/relations, development studies, and sociology, are taught in Africa. I completed a bachelor’s degree and graduate studies in political science and international relations in Ghana. My training had no components on Global South epistemologies or methods. During my graduate studies in international relations, my courses were based on realism, liberalism, and a sprinkling of constructivism. There were no courses on critical theory, including postcolonial theory, or courses on African international relations. Theoretical perspectives on Africa’s development were predominantly based on dependency theory, neo-colonialism, and Cold War politics. Based on my experience, I can say that the hegemony of Western international relations (and social science broadly) is partly perpetuated by how the subject is taught, not just in the West, but also in Africa.

Additionally, the underrepresentation of African scholars(hip) in Northern institutions is both descriptive and prescriptive and may not be intentional marginalisation (Basedau, 2020). It is a description of poorly funded education and research in Africa, which automatically affects output and policy. Poor educational funding partly leads talented African academics to seek faculty positions in the Global North. Clapham (2020: 149) argues that Africans with academic positions in Global North institutions have often gone through the processes of intellectual formation required by such institutions whose structures are equally established and resistant to significant change. These northern institutions and agents may not be the right audience for a decolonisation project given their normative and material positions. Serunkuma (2024) has eloquently argued

that it is erroneous to conceive of invitations of African scholars by Western institutions to teach, research, and write about Africa as decolonisation. According to him, such invitations “ought not to be discoursed as decolonisation but for everything else such as cultural exchange, diversity, educational tourism, employment in Europe and North America” (Serunkuma 2024: 3). As such, African agency in these spaces should be assessed on how it shapes the decolonial discourse rather than in terms of numbers. Assessment based on the number of black faculty can downplay the contributions of African intellectuals in Western institutions. Because we cannot deny that the presence of Africans in these spaces has contributed positively to fracturing the dismissive attitude towards African epistemes in African Studies in the Global North.

The discussions so far demonstrate that the decolonisation project must occur endogenously. As Serunkuma (2024) has argued, African societies must be the focus of (epistemic) decolonisation to generate Africa-relevant knowledge that build local capacities to improve political-economic conditions at home first. As I have articulated above, the Africa-North framing of decolonisation often leads decolonial thinkers on a problematic research journey that, because of the focus on the relationship between Africa and the North either ignores or does not fully grasp the complexity of the African condition. Where African societies and knowledges are referenced, it is often about reclaiming an authentic, precolonial past. Indeed, proponents of decolonisation often issue the disclaimer that reference to AIKS is not a claim to an authentic precolonial past. However, the North–South ontological site and the epistemological primacy of colonialism often undercut the disclaimer.

Towards an Agency-Based Ontology, Epistemology, and Method

Despite its impacts on Africa, colonialism does not (and should not) have epistemological primacy in understanding and improving the lives of ordinary Africans, especially after sixty years of political independence. It is paradoxical to contend that Africa is not an object of study but a place of knowledge while claiming that such knowledge suffers permanently from the epistemicidal agency of the West. Even if one accepts that African epistemes suffer epistemicide due to Western knowledge imposition, the decolonial project should aim at answering the following question by Blaut (2012: 1):

Is it possible for people, whose ways of knowing, which is subject to colonial domination, to imagine another way of living, outside of that which is determined by the colonizer’s model of the world?

Both protagonists and critics of decolonisation answer “yes” to this question. They, however, explain their epistemological and political project differently. Proponents overwhelmingly focus on the epistemic front to imagine alternative ways of life because knowledge has social and political power (Kessi et al., 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021, 2023b, 2023c). They argue that knowledge, as the new source of domination, emanates from unequal exchanges of (policy) ideas between Africa and the West (Hickel et al., 2021). Therefore,

the decolonial project is driven by Africans' "attempts, efforts, struggles initiatives [at] de-constitution and re-constitution of knowledge" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2023b: 5). However, the struggles against "knowledge imperialism" or "cognitive empire" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2023b: 5), "can only take place when the peoples of the non-Western world continue with the struggle of decolonisation of knowledge while putting pressure on Europe and North America to engage in knowledge de-imperialisation" (Ndlovu, 2014: 84). Thus, proponents of decolonisation take the 'West versus Africa' as the ontological site for their decolonial projects. This approach to Blaut's question, which happens to be the dominant discourse, renders African agency as contingent, bounded, or circumscribed agency.

A more productive approach would define both theoretical and practical projects that focus on the lives of ordinary Africans. At the theoretical level, decolonisation must devise systems that can "pick up essential features of colonialism, what their effects were and *how they can be overcome*" (Matolino, 2020: 218, emphasis added). These new systems must emerge through an "endogenous" approach to African knowledges (Hountondji, 1997; Serunkuma, 2024) that studies "Africa simultaneously as a place *in* the world and *of* the world [indicating] its specificity and its globality" (Abrahamsen, 2017: 127, emphasis in original). The endogenous approach to African knowledge is critical in unsettling the marginality of African agency and knowledges.

At the discursive level, the constant representations of African knowledges as inhabiting the margins of global knowledges essentialise them and naturalise the underlying political processes. The framing of Africa's epistemic marginality as an unmitigated effect of colonialism, for instance, naturalises African governments' choices to underfund universities and research on the continent. Furthermore, even if we accept that Africans and their knowledges are on the margins of the global order, it is productive to "think of margins as spaces of possibilities, resistance and creativity" to allow for a new constellation of ideas and approaches to emerge (Musila, 2018: 2). It was from the margins of slavery and colonial domination that African liberation struggles emerged, gathered momentum and prevailed.

At the practical level, a "post-independence" approach focused on the lives of ordinary Africans is more proactive than reactionary, "directed towards obtaining tangible outcomes that demonstrate the success of reversing the damage caused by colonialism" (Matolino, 2020: 218). This approach includes taking "responsibility for some of our [Africans] problematic actions that have contributed to poverty and suffering" (Matolino, 2020: 224). For Matolino (2020: 224), colonialism as a political programme had a beginning and an end date, between which Africans resisted and eventually triumphed. Hence, Africans have never been bereft of agency. Since independence, Africans have been at the forefront of calling for a fair and equitable international economic order. Importantly, the first generation of decolonial thinkers in the 1960s and 1970s were fully aware that achieving a fair international economic order was primarily contingent on political decisions – African agency – in Africa. The Lagos Plan of Action for the Economic Development of Africa, for instance, demonstrates a thinking on decolonial project as endogenous. The current decolonial theory and intended praxes can benefit from engaging such thinking about African agency anew (see Tieku, 2022).

At the epistemological level, proactive as opposed to reactive approaches allow for a methodological design that centralises Africa's contribution to knowledge. A meticulous example of this approach is Thomas Kwasi Tieku's (2022) recent works regarding Africa's international relations broadly and more specifically his Legon School of International Relations (Tieku, 2021). What can we learn from his efforts, and how should we go about theorising and embarking on a political project that centres the decolonising agent? As Matolino contends, decolonisation does not presently offer a sufficient framework. I propose "post-independence" as a critical conceptual expansion of the decolonial framework approach that enables us to engage in this political project. This is not to suggest that the socio-political problems of ordinary Africans have nothing to do with the colonial effects and the neoliberal global order; however, African scholarship emerges from a "critical tradition premised on an ethic of freedom," of which decolonisation constitutes only one aspect (Mama, 2007:89). Such scholarship:

regards itself as integral to the struggle for freedom and holds itself accountable, not to a particular institution, regime, class, or gender, but to the imagination, aspiration and interests of ordinary people (Mama, 2007).

Mama's contention has important implications for the ontology, epistemology, and methods for decolonial discourse. The constant framing of the North–South as the site where marginalisation, domination, and oppression occur ignore or pay inadequate attention to other locations where coloniality occurs.

Additionally, the North–South framing depoliticises African agency by suggesting that marginalisation, domination, and injustice are things that (only) non-Africans (whites) do to Africans. The methodological implication underlies North–South ontological primacy but tends to overlook the significance of internally generated problems (Matolino, 2020). Some decolonial scholars, for example, advocate a return to African precolonial institutions and knowledges as a panacea to Africa's problems, sometimes framing Africa's precolonial past and indigenous institutions as authentic and legitimate. However, African precolonial institutions (read as chieftaincy) were rife with power inequalities that found new manifestations during and after the colonial encounter (Sseremba, 2023). In some places, beneficiaries of precolonial institutions have resisted post-independence state-building and institutional reforms to maintain the status quo (Goodfellow and Lindemann, 2013). In other contexts, they have exploited Western normative and material incentives to govern local populations while maintaining existing power inequalities (e.g. Komujuni and Büscher, 2020; Millar, 2017). Without attention to such dynamics, we lose analytical insights into how local power relations connect with and maintain global inequalities.

It is well established that the colonial enterprise was not equally experienced within and between African political settings, so has the post-independence experience diverged. Hence, a decolonial project may mean different things to different people. Locating the political project of undoing coloniality within the North–South divide risks glossing over these differences and the endogenous knowledge and solutions needed to address

persistent challenges. Overemphasis on “decolonial reflection and usage of decolonial frameworks begins to contribute towards neglecting taking seriously our other senses of who we are and how we have come to be what we are” (Matolino, 2020: 223).

Take, for instance, the issue of epistemic (in)justice, which is the core issue for decolonisation. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2023a) argues that epistemic injustice is sustained through Western “intellectual imperialism” and has rendered Africans minds (wa Thiong’o, 1986, 2012) and their cognition intractably captured in the “colonial library” (Mudimbe, 1988). When proponents make this claim, they are often referring to the representation of Africans and African knowledges in Global North universities and institutions. There is a second policy-oriented explanation, which is often implied if not explicit – Western knowledge is not universal. In other words, Western policy solutions that emerge from their knowledge claims about Africa do not work for African problems. This necessitates African solutions for African problems based on African knowledges. This framing should lead to research projects that aim to define the African problems and look for AIKS solutions. The definition of Africa’s problems and solutions, in terms of seeking epistemic justice from the Global North, is misplaced and problematic.

For instance, when decolonial scholars argue for epistemic pluralism, what does it mean? Does it mean the need for Westerners to acknowledge that there exists a non-Western body of thought and scholarship? Or is it an ontological/normative claim that Africans have (indigenous) knowledge systems? If it is the former, then the decolonial project is reduced to a yearning for Western recognition of African knowledges. To be sure, I am not against epistemic pluralism. I am making a case for it. However, my pitch for epistemic pluralism is not a yearning for Western recognition that Africans have knowledges. No one in this era will argue that Africans do not have history or epistemes. Neither will anyone contend that African history is a history of colonialism alone.

Rather, I am explicitly calling for our efforts to be directed at developing the capacities of African knowledge systems to benefit Africans rather than concentrating our efforts on challenging epistemic empire as it manifests between the Global North and South. The associated political project of a normative/ontological claim to African knowledge systems will be to develop knowledge indices and funding mechanisms to create African knowledge economies that generate from and respond to African needs. Once we shift our attention to this, we will soon realise that what is needed is research investment to develop the competencies of African knowledges. It is not productive to spend precious time making claims about (dismissive) Western views about AIKS. Rather, the focus should be on the endogenous development of its competencies.

In this regard, I suggest post-independence as a viable concept to re-centre the everyday lives of ordinary Africans as the referent object of African agency. Post-independence offers descriptive and prescriptive inferences, locating both material and immaterial responsibilities of Africans in recentring our history. A post-independence approach to the study of African realities raises methodological questions that take political independence as the starting point: in what ways can we make the control of our political and socio-economic affairs matter for ordinary Africans in *all aspects* of life? What specific solutions do AIKS offer to the myriad problems that

afflict the continent? Focusing on answering these questions is a more productive way to reimagine ways of undoing the harms of colonialism by reading it as an episodic moment in Africa's long history.

A post-independence approach to the decolonial project is critical, reflexive, and proactive. It is self-aware and open to the same immanent, reflexive critique that made decolonisation thought possible in the first place (Cawood and Amiradakis, 2023). For Mbembe (2019), decolonisation "is not about the sharing of boundaries. It is about deborderisation" (also Hountondji, 1996). Without immanent, reflexive critique, Mbembe (2019: n.p) warns that decolonisation "although fought in the name of equality and justice" may produce mobilisations that

might end up re-enacting a sectarian logic of enclosure, underpinned as they are by flawed notions of identity, gender or culture as spaces of protection and immunity, as borders which allow for a closing off from those who are not as radical as us.

Mbembe's admonition could not be more apt for the Africa-West binary framing of decolonisation discourse. The binary framing of power relations in the decolonial discourses glosses over local structures of domination and oppression in post-independence Africa that may be constitutive of, connect to, and sustains global oppressive structures.

Emancipatory decolonial discourse ought to take the conception of coloniality as "an octopus" seriously. If we understand coloniality as an "octopus constituted by hierarchies of domination, control and exploitation" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015: 487), which I agree it is, then our approach must be necessarily reflexive and self-critical. It must be built on self-awareness that an insular form of decoloniality is prone to "fundamentalisms" (Cawood and Amiradakis, 2023; Grosfoguel, 2007: 212). For the decolonial political project to succeed, we must be attentive to all the tentacles of the coloniality octopus.

One way to accomplish this is to localise the decolonial critique with the understanding that local neglect, inequality, marginalisation, and oppression in post-independence Africa shape and reinforce how patterns of global domination, inequality, and oppression manifest in people's lives. A reflexive decolonial approach focused on post-independence, like the one I advocate, must consider how "Africans would want to hold each other to account for their actions in the present era" (Matolino, 2022: 225). This approach re-centres ordinary people's struggles as the site of agency and the locus of what it means to be free in a post-independence Africa.

Conclusion

If you were to ask Africans in Africa to explain the sources of the problems that confront them, they would likely describe how successive governments have failed to put policies and programmes in place to better their lives since independence.² Colonialism will not be an explanatory framework. I suggest that both critics and proponents of decolonisation are (or ought to be) concerned about the same phenomenon: the everyday realities of ordinary Africans in post-independence world. They are both writing about and

advocating epistemic and political projects to understand and improve Africans' lives. This project should not take Africa-Global North as its primary ontological site for the epistemological and methodological debate. It should concern itself with understanding how ordinary Africans locate themselves in the world in their quest to understand what it means to be free. Once we reframe our attention in this manner, we will be closer to imagining what is at stake. Without this, decolonisation risks becoming an elite project primarily concerned with African academics in Global North institutions fighting for more representation.³ On the political front, it can become an apologia for the political neglect of ordinary Africans on the continent where underdevelopment, and widespread poverty are rationalised and blamed on colonialism and slavery.

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Notes

1. On 11 January 2024, I queried Google Scholar and limited the search to since 2022, '*decolonisation and African studies*' yielded 17,800 results within 0.07 seconds, '*decolonising African Studies*' yielded about 18,400 results within 0.08 seconds, '*decolonial turn in African studies*' yielded 17,700 results in 0.09 seconds, '*decoloniality in African studies*' yielded 17,300 results in 0.08 seconds.
2. One only needs to look cursorily at the Afrobarometer Surveys to discover what is at stake, <https://www.afrobarometer.org/>, accessed on 14 January 2024.
3. There is certainly nothing wrong with asking for inclusive workplace practices and better working conditions.

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Vers un tournant/théorie critique décolonial : Dépasse le binaire Occident-Afrique

Résumé

La montée des écrits sur la décolonisation dans les études africaines suscite des craintes que ce concept ne devienne une simple métaphore, un trope idéologique ou un effet de mode. Alors, les chercheurs mettant en avant la pertinence continue de la théorie décoloniale pour l'émancipation des Africains anciennement colonisés. Cet essai soutient que, pour atteindre ses objectifs émancipatoires, la théorie décoloniale et les pratiques qui en découlent doivent recentrer les réalités quotidiennes des sociétés africaines. En se détachant du cadre binaire du Nord global contre l'Afrique, le projet décolonial peut devenir moins réactif et plus proactif. Ce recentrage des sociétés africaines a d'importantes implications épistémologiques et méthodologiques, notamment pour renforcer l'agency africaine. Je propose le concept de « post-indépendance » comme nouvelle approche de la décolonisation, offrant des outils à la fois descriptifs et prescriptifs pour redéfinir les responsabilités matérielles et immatérielles des Africains dans la réappropriation de leur histoire. La post-indépendance permet de réimaginer comment défaire les effets du colonialisme en présentant celui-ci comme un moment épisodique dans la longue histoire de l'Afrique.

Mots-clés

agency Africaine, études Africaines, decolonialite critique, Décolonisation, post-indépendance